Sierra Leone, slavery and Murray Town

A brief narrative

Sierra Leone has a rich and varied history but its association with slavery - and Emancipation seem to predominate in any narrative of the country's history. Portuguese sailors who named the country, Serra Lyoa meaning Lion Mountain Because of its picturesque range of mountains, discovered the country in 1462. This 'discovery' did not mean that Sierra Leone was not already populated. Research Shows that the country had a settled life ca 2500BC with pottery making and small agricultural holdings. Between 1450 and 1700 there was a large Mande now spelt Mende migration into Sierra Leone and in 1727, there was a Muslim Jihad to expand the Muslim religion in the country. Small tribal communities were already established in certain parts of the country; the Temnes and Lokos were mainly settled in the northwest, Limbas in the north and the Kissi and Kono in the East. The Vai, Baga and Bullom communities were settled along the coast.

As the first European country to make contact with Sierra Leone, they were the first to establish normal trade links with the country and Europe. This trade was soon to be replaced by the Atlantic slavery and Sierra Leone became an important source for slaves. Bunce or Bence or Bance was one of many slave forts built along the West Coast of Africa by Europeans to imprison captured Africans before transportation to The New World. It is estimated that more than 50,000 Africans were shipped from this island alone. Nearly all of these slaves were taken to South Carolina and Georgia were they formed a distinctive group known as the Gullahs and they are known to have exported rice cultivation to this part of the United States.

Resettlement in Sierra Leone

Between the 16th and 18th century, there were about 15000 Black people in London who were thought of as a menace to society and so infuriated Queen Elizabeth 1 to pass a proclamation for them to be repatriated. Many of these were free men, others were runaway slaves, and many had fought for King and Country during the American Revolution and were promised their freedom after the war. They were destitute and impoverished and their condition led to the founding of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor. This relatively small organisation was soon to aspire to the lofty heights of establishing a colony for the re-settlement of Africans. This was no mean feat, however Henry Smeathman, an English naturalist who in the early 1770's had been studying insects in Banana Inland in the peninsular returned to London and with the help of others put forward a plan to the Treasury to settle free Black slaves in Sierra Leone.

Not many Africans were willing to be repatriated, but after long delays and encouragement, 600 Africans indicated their willingness to travel. When the ships left Blackwall in London there were just about 250 Africans on board. The journey was difficult. On arrival several weeks later, they were met by the local Temne chief King Tom who thought he was negotiating with Captain Thompson for permission to stay

in a 400 square mile of the colony. The Captain was actually buying the piece of land now known as Freetown to re-settle Africans. When the King finally realised he had signed away a large chunk of his kingdom by putting his mark on a piece of paper, be became agitated and refused to abide by the terms of the agreement, but it was already too late. His successor, King Jimmy, was disposed to disagreements and set about almost immediately to revoke the agreements made with his predecessor by asking for gifts from the settlers and generally becoming a menace. An English Captain who had arrived with legal instructions to regulate the physical conditions of slaves could not tolerate the antics of King Jimmy and decided to take action. A skirmish ensued around the area known as Granville Town and it took the negotiating skills of another King Naimbana to broker peace. After the departure of Captain Savage, King Jimmy burnt down the Granville Town. In any case the settlers could not live in this area of the province because of the inhospitable conditions and lack of agricultural lands to grow food. They were forced to move into the regions and some worked with slave owners, others indeed became slave owners.

Another group of emancipated slaves to arrive in Freetown came from Nova Scotia in Canada. These were slaves who were promised freedom if they served with the British army during the American War of Independence. They were dissatisfied with conditions in Nova Scotia and petitioned the British government to be sent to Sierra Leone. On arrival in 1791, these settlers built a community in Granville Town, the area demolished by the Temne Chief, King Jimmy and renamed the new settlement Freetown.

A third group of settlers to the colony were the Maroons of Jamaica. They were freed slaves who escaped or were released by their Spanish owners before the capture of the Island by the British. The Maroons became formidable fighters and difficult negotiators with the British colonisers. They were exiled to Nova Scotia and after a petition to the British government were sent to Sierra Leone and on arrival were immediately enlisted to help suppress a rebellion over taxes.

By far the largest group of people to settle in Freetown were the Recaptives or Liberated Africans. In an attempt to enforce abolition, Britain set up judicial systems in Freetown for the seizure and adjudication of any slave ship captured in the high seas. Slaves who were released in this way were referred to as Recaptives or Liberated Africans. The Captains of captured ships were paid compensation for the loss of their human 'cargo'. Many Sierra Leoneans may be surprised to know that predominant among the recaptives were Mendes, Temnes, indigenous tribes of the country, Igbo and Yoruba from Nigeria, Ashanti and others from Ghana. The recaptives increased the population in the colony from two thousand around in 1808 to about 80,000 in 1850.

Its ethnicity was varied, its culture multifarious, its civilisation patchy. The British Administrators instituted a parish system of control and established the mountain villages of Leicester, Regent, Wilberforce, and the western area of Wellington, Hastings and Waterloo. Other communities were established by the Liberated

Africans in places such as Congo Town, Kissy, Murray Town, Aberdeen, and Lumley. The acculturation of Freed and receptive slaves, those from Nova Scotia and the Maroons created the group or community of people known as the Krios.

The Krios took on British/European names, but most kept their African first names. The Anglican Church through the Church Missionary Society (CMS) continued its role in the life of the colony by removing a large number of its missionaries from the north of Sierra Leone where despite its missionary zeal were unsuccessful in making many converts to Christianity. The settlers who had already had Christian influences and the acculturated liberated Africans were easier targets for conversion and evangelisation. And so the missionaries set out to work in its mission and in education. An agreement was made between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the British government who would build churches and schools and as a quid pro quo, the CMS would provide teachers and village administrators, hence Fourah Bay College was established in 1827 to produce teachers and missionaries and CMS Grammar School in 1845 to teach religion and general education for boys and Annie Walsh Memorial school for girls as a counterpart to CMS Grammar school. In 1876, Fourah Bay College became affiliated with Durham University. In 1874 and 1880 respectively, the Wesleyan Methodist Society opened the Methodist Boys High school and Methodist Girls High school respectively. Other schools were later opened and nearly all followed the example set by earlier educational establishments of the CMS. The standard and content of the education system was British Fourah Bay College and CMS Grammar School were the first institutions of higher learning established in sub Saharan Africa. Indeed, Sierra Leone was at one time referred to as the 'Athens of West Africa'.

The British connection to Sierra Leone through slavery and enslavement and its declaration in 1853 that settlers and liberated Africans were British subjects re-enforces the supposition that the KRIOS should be referred to as Black Englishmen/women!! ! !

Sam Walker
Former Director; Black Cultural Archives & founder member of Murray Town Association UK